4. Behind the Numbers: Home Demolitions in Occupied East Jerusalem

Mohammed Haddad

Abstract

If you have patience and can count, then you can do data journalism.

Keywords: human stories, data journalism, Middle East, mapping, home demolitions

When you look at the chart below (Figure 4.1), you will see a series of steady orange and black bars followed by a large spike in 2016. Once you take a closer look at the caption you will understand that this chart shows the number of structures destroyed and people affected by Israel's policy of home demolitions.

As Nathan Yau, author of *Flowing Data*, put it, “data is an abstraction of real life” (2013). Each number represents a family, and each number tells a story.

“Broken Homes” is the most comprehensive project to date tracking home demolitions in East Jerusalem, a Palestinian neighbourhood that has been occupied by Israel for 50 years.¹

Working closely with the United Nations, *Al Jazeera* tracked every single home demolition in East Jerusalem in 2016. It turned out to be a record year, with 190 structures destroyed and more than 1,200 Palestinians displaced or affected.

We decided to tackle this project after witnessing an escalation in violence between Israelis and Palestinians in late 2015. The goal was twofold: To

¹ <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2017/jerusalem-2016-home-demolitions/index.html>

Figure 4.1. Graph showing East Jerusalem home demolitions, 2009–2016.

Source: *Al Jazeera*.

understand how Israel's home demolitions policy would be affected by the increased tensions, and to tell readers the human stories behind the data.

The project reveals the impact on Palestinian families through video testimony, 360-degree photos and an interactive map that highlights the location, frequency and impact of each demolition.

Our producer in Doha began coordinating with the UN in late 2015 to develop a framework for the project. The UN routinely gathers data on home demolitions, and while some of it is available online, other aspects—including GPS coordinates—are only recorded internally. We wanted to be able to show every demolition site on a map, so we began obtaining monthly data sets from the UN. For each incident, we included the demolition date, number of people and structures affected, a brief description of what happened, and a point on our East Jerusalem map showing the location. We cross-checked these with news reports and other local information about home demolitions. We then selected a case to highlight each month, as a way of showing different facets of the Israeli policy—from punitive to administrative demolitions, affecting everyone from young children to elderly residents.

Our reporter on the ground travelled throughout East Jerusalem over the course of the year to speak with many of the affected families, in order

Figure 4.2. Panoramic photograph of home demolished in May 2016.

Source: *Al Jazeera*.

to explore their losses in greater depth and to photograph and record the demolition sites.

There was a broad range of responses from the affected families. The interviews had to take place in the physical location of the demolition, which could be a difficult experience for those affected, so sensitivity and patience were required at all stages, from setting up the meetings to recording the material.

On the whole, the families responded well to the project. They were very generous with their time and in sharing their experiences. In one instance, a man had written down a list of things he wanted to say to us. In another case, it took a few attempts to convince the family to take part. One family declined to meet with us and so we had to liaise with the UN and find another family willing to speak about their home demolition.

Many news organizations, including *Al Jazeera*, have reported on individual home demolitions over the years. One of the main reasons for taking a data-driven approach this time was to clearly contextualize the scale of the story by counting each and every demolition. This context and fresh perspective are especially important when reporting on an ongoing topic to keep readers engaged.

A word of advice for aspiring data journalists: Taking a data-driven approach to a story doesn't need to be technical or expensive. Sometimes simply following and counting occurrences of an event over time tells you a lot about the scale of a problem. As long as your data-gathering methodology remains consistent, there are many stories that you can tell using data that

you might not otherwise report on. Also, be patient. We gathered data for an entire year to tell this story. The most important thing is to thoroughly storyboard exactly what data you need before sending any reporters out into the field. Most of the time you won't need any special equipment either. We used an iPhone to take all the 360-degree images and capture the specific GPS coordinates.

The project—released in January 2017 in English, Arabic and Bosnian—presents a grim warning about what lies ahead as Israel continues to deny building permits to 98% of Palestinian applicants, ramping up the pressure on a large and growing population.

Works Cited

Yau, N. (2013, June 28). Understanding data—Context. *Big Think*. <https://bigthink.com/experts-corner/understanding-data-context>

About the Author

Mohammed Haddad is a data journalist and interactive editor at the Al Jazeera Media Network based in the Middle East.